

Ugly Betty April 20, 2008

Linda: I wonder how many of you have seen the show, Ugly Betty? I have to admit I've only seen it a handful of times—and frankly, I'm not quite sure what to make of it, but as is often the case with our worship team planning, some of our best work comes because of pure spontaneity and serendipity. When we began discussing this topic Stan had just returned from the large church conference in Orlando...I said something about Ugly Betty and he began gesticulating like the donkey from Shrek...ooh, ooh, pick me, pick me. Apparently, he'd seen a service that the host church did down there centered around Ugly Betty. Stan, what was it about that service...

Stan: Just a second...I want to go back to the donkey thing...Linda, are you saying I'm an...

Linda: STAN!

Stan: Okay, okay...Well, in all honesty do you remember that scene in the first Shrek where all the fairytale characters are being rounded up? The woman brings little donkey up to the king's men and says she has a talking donkey...and he says...nothing?

Well, he finally talks, and later in the movie, Shrek gently points out that the problem with donkey is not getting him to talk, but getting him to shut up! That...really resonates with me. Those who know me, or have ever sat in a meeting with me know I can sometimes be a little verbose.

Linda: Verbose? A little?

Stan: Yup, it's true. I do tend to talk a bit, and do tend to take a while to make a point.

Linda: Kinda like...now.

Stan: Yeah...kinda like now. But, believe it or not, I haven't always been this way...and really that is why the Ugly Betty service I saw in Orlando hit me like a ton of bricks. When I was a child...even as an adult...even...now, often times I didn't ever think I measured up. When I was a kid I was always overweight...I wasn't a very good student—I got made fun of, picked last...you name it. So to see this young woman...Ugly Betty—wow, could I ever identify.

Linda: You know Stan, as I reflect on how you have so personally connected with the storyline here, it occurs to me just how common this is for many of us...me included. For me personally, sometimes when I am faced with some of my own inadequacies, it is much

easier for me to think about them in a more academic way. It keeps it at an arm's reach.

One of the ways that happens is by telling someone else's story rather than my own. That's probably why a book entitled *The Church of 80% Sincerity* caught my eye in an airport recently. The foreword was written by one of my favorite authors, Anne Lamott, and it turned out to be a quick read.

The author of the book is David Roche, who shares the struggle he has had with self-acceptance. He was born with a facial deformity that he says has made his life anything but easy. But, to me, one of the saddest things about his story was how the church (in this case it happened to be the Catholic Church, but it could be any church) inflicted so much damage on him as a young boy. He said that he was smart, an altar boy and an all-around good kid, so when he was 13, he decided that he wanted to be a priest. At that time in history, age 13 was the time when boys were commonly accepted into seminary.

He went to meet with the priests whose duty it was to accept young men into seminary, and he shared with them how he loved Jesus and how he felt called to be a priest. The two priests left the room for a few minutes, and when they returned they said to him, "David, we do not think that you have the call to be a priest. Because of your appearance, people would not respect you as a priest."

Stan, reading David Roche's story caused me to deal with the "Ugly Betty" in *me*. And I'm guessing that feeling of inadequacy and being unacceptable is something most of us here can relate to as well. I began thinking about my childhood and what I felt like in those days.

For example, I saw myself as a pretty ugly kid. I've always had red hair, and I hated it as a young kid. I didn't know anyone else who had red hair, so something had to be wrong with it. I certainly didn't think of it as fashionable at the time. Kids often made fun of me, calling me "Carrot-top," or "Red." I hated it, and wished like anything I looked more like the other kids.

And then not being able to see the chalkboard and having to get glasses didn't help much. (Picture of Linda) None of my other friends had glasses, and I felt really out of place—as though something was even more wrong with me. The fact that I chose some rather "Ugly Betty" styled black rimmed glasses that I wore until we could afford to buy contact lenses probably didn't help much either.

However, it wasn't all outward appearance. I was pretty clear on the fact that I wasn't a very attractive child, but I also felt a lot of the time as though I wasn't quite good enough, and frankly, that lasted a long, long time. One of the things that happened to me in high school that I still think about occasionally was the rejection I got from

the high school sorority. I couldn't really figure out if it was because they just didn't like me, if I wasn't good enough for them, or if it was because I came from the wrong side of the tracks, or if I really was an awful, unacceptable person. That really put a major dent in my self-confidence, and all I could do was study hard and try to make good grades, thinking that at least they couldn't take that away from me. I felt like "ugly Linda" both inside and out in those days.

Stan: Inside and out...I sure can identify with that Linda...far too much for comfort actually. When I was a kid I was always a cut up, the class clown, the funny guy...the reality is, is that was a cover up for a kid with a terrible self-image. I think I thought that if I was funny enough, no one would notice I was overweight and not a very good student. I've struggled with weight all my life...I was always overweight...the fat kid. (Picture of Stan) Even though I was decent at sports as a kid, nobody every picked me to be on their team because of the way I looked. Kind of like David Roche I guess...they sized me up, as it were, and decided based on my appearance I couldn't play.

And Linda, I'll never forget the time in high school when I had made the varsity basketball team...the coach thought he'd humiliate me into losing some weight. He purposely issued me a game jersey that was way too small. It was tight around my stomach so that you could clearly see my spare tire. I was forced to run up and down the court in front of the whole school...the whole town...humiliated and embarrassed.

And unlike you...I was a terrible student. As a kid I was diagnosed as being dyslexic. (Picture of Stan) In order to try and overcome this learning disability, I was forced to go to special tutoring and special classes—well, everyone in the whole school knew that the only kids who went to THOSE classes were the dumb kids. Even the kids I considered to be my friends poked fun at me for that. And Linda, those scars run deep—they are part of me that doesn't ever go away...that still cause me to view a different person than everyone else sees when I look in the mirror.

Linda: Well, Stan, it seems evident to me that we all struggle with issues of self-esteem to one degree or another. It's been my experience that, no matter how good we look on the outside, how "together" we seem, how "successful" we may appear, virtually all of us struggle with that same sort of issue.

Stan: Absolutely...and Linda, I have to tell you I was stunned a few months ago after reading an article about the actor Dennis Quaid...do you know him? (Picture of Dennis Quaid) There was an article about him that said he has struggled with a poor self body image all his life. In his 30s I guess he struggled with anorexia. I was blown away by that...Like you said, we may look good on the outside, but on the inside...it is a different story.

Linda: Do you ever wonder why it's the way it is? Now I'm not a psychologist, so I won't even try to delve into the reasons why we might have such difficulty with a positive self-concept, but it seems that we all do. I wonder if it might have to do with the sense that we are, in one way, or another flawed and disfigured, either internally or externally. Deep down, we may doubt that we are in any way acceptable or loveable.

I also have a hunch that most of us have a place inside where fear resides. Sometimes it's the fear of being unworthy, stupid, a failure that may really be the fear of some ugliness that's buried deep inside us. We're afraid—afraid that we will be embarrassed, afraid that we'll be humiliated, afraid that we'll be "found out" because of that ugliness. As a result, we find ways to sit at the back of the room, looking at the ground, never making eye contact, so no one will make fun of us.

I just don't think that's the way God wants us to live, so in order for us to live the life God wants for us, something has to change. I believe it has to do with coming to terms with our own flawed condition, and going through that process is critical to our well-being. It's not just a human struggle that's hard work, but I believe it is truly a spiritual experience. It's difficult, and yet, I believe it's worth it. We have to be willing to begin.

How might we start that process? It seems to me that one powerful place is by listening to God...One of my favorite Psalms is one where the writer celebrates the unique person God has created each of us to be. It says:

"You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—and how well I know it."

For me, that is the perfect and beautiful image of who we really are, and how God sees us.

Stan: But Linda, I think you have named it...in order for us to see ourselves as God sees us...it *is* coming to grips with our own flawed condition, and it *is* hard work...and it *is* a life-long process. Linda, you'll recall that a bunch of us did that *Now Discover Your Strengths* book...The premise of the book is that it helps you define your strengths and live into them...use *them*...instead of trying to overcome your weaknesses. It says that most of us spend a lifetime trying to overcome our weaknesses, and never really live out that person God knit together in our mother's womb.

The fact is for me...later in life, I achieved in school—made the deans list...for the right reasons this time! But the truth is, I still carry a lot of self doubt...Sure I made all As, but I had to work twice as hard as everyone else to get them. My heart says good work...job well done, but my head says your not quite there...keep trying.

God made you and me, and loves us. In God's eyes, we are beautiful.

Closing:

Henry Winkler has said, "A human being's first responsibility is to shake hands with himself." With God's loving presence in our lives, we can do that.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

Linda: Yeah..our heads and hearts aren't always in synch, are they, Stan? I really believe God desperately wants each of us to discover and live by those strengths. And if we can get to the place where we can see ourselves as God sees us, that can shed a whole new light on our self concept.

If we get to the point of embracing who God has created us to be, we're on our way to being able to love ourselves, and when we can do that, we become more loving toward both ourselves and others.

Stan: And Linda, I was reminded lately that often times when we are not loving towards others...it is usually because we don't love ourselves. You've probably noticed that Harry is now wearing glasses...We'll a few weeks ago he came home from school and just collapsed into my arms sobbing. Kids at school were making fun of him for his glasses. We both know that teasing at this age is painful...well, I asked him if he knew why those kids made fun of him. "No, why?" Kids that make fun of others generally don't like themselves. Someone, somewhere is telling them *they* are ugly, fat, stupid...something. I asked Harry if he understood...he did. Harry, what can we do instead...we can give kids compliments?

Linda: Harry is spot on...Something we can do *is* to be intentional about complimenting and affirming others. As you said to Harry, when we point out the flaws in others, it's usually because we ourselves possess those very same flaws.

We all want and need affirmation and praise, and it's virtually impossible to receive too much. As John Masefield once said, "Once in a century a person may be ruined or made insufferable by praise. But surely once in a minute something generous dies for want of it." As we are growing into accepting and loving ourselves, let's agree that we'll be generous with our affirmation of others.

The man born with a facial deformity whom I mentioned earlier shared a story in his book about the beginning of his self-acceptance. As difficult as his prior church experience had been, that experience provided the exact opposite for David Roche. He was speaking before a congregation, and he was overwhelmed with the way that those who were there accepted him, affirmed him, encouraged him. Because of that church experience, he was able to say: "And my feeling of ugliness, of being a freak, of being gross—they all washed away, and I was being baptized, baptized in a sea of love and support." He said that he knew that he was in the presence of God and the people of God who loved him unconditionally, just as he was.

We can have that experience, too. You see, God made us; God loves us; we are God's creation. As some graffiti in a New York subway once read, "God don't make no junk." No, God doesn't make junk, because